

The tutorial was born
in 1970 of the college's
dissatisfaction with a
highly scripted curriculum.
Nine hundred-plus
tutorials later, it remains
the cornerstone of a
Grinnell education —
and one of the College's
most beloved academic
innovations.

The Tutorial Turns

40

Professor of Art Lee Running
engages first-year students
in discussion at a meeting
of her tutorial, Papermaking:
a Studio Approach.



Photo by Jim Heenstra

Lisa Austin '14, right, Professor of Religious Studies Henry Rietz, center, and Tammy Prusha, executive assistant to the president, left, discuss Austin's tutorial project: curating a gallery of student work to be hung on the walls of Prusha's

by **Richard Cleaver '75**

First-Year Tutorial: It's the course every Grinnellian takes. Each professor structures his or her tutorial offering differently, but all have the same goal: Introduce students to close reading, small-class discussion, analytical thinking, and persuasive writing — skills Grinnell considers essential to academic success in any discipline.

Emily Mester '14 is taking the tutorial this fall from **Henry Rietz '89**, professor of religious studies. His tutorial, *The Cult of Grinnell*, examines distinctive aspects of the College's culture using the tools of religious studies.

"It feels more exploratory and less prescribed" than other classes, Mester says. "The articles we are reading are obviously ones he loves, and that makes it exciting."

The Tutorial Today

Up to 36 tutorials, each with about 12 students, are offered every fall. All departments participate; faculty members choose their own topics, and incoming students pick from among them.

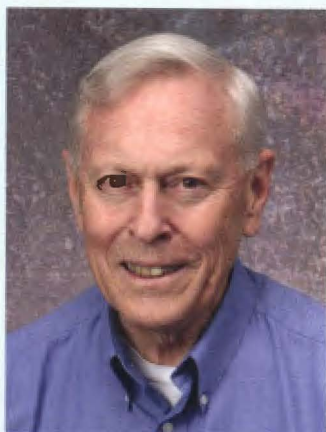
The tutorial instructor is also the student's academic adviser until the student declares a major. Close adviser-advisee relationships were a goal from the beginning, and advising is integrated into the coursework.

"All of my tutorials explore, in some way, how we create identities," says Rietz. "Along with a final project requiring students to figure out what they are interested in, this focus on identities helps me learn what students are passionate about." Such an open-ended assignment can be daunting, but it allows Rietz to ask students where they see themselves in 15 years — and to discuss with them how they can use their liberal arts education to get there. "There isn't just one kind of Grinnell student," he adds. "So an open curriculum based on intensive advising is ideal."

This tutorial and advising system — now often referred to as the individually advised curriculum — is one of Grinnell's major points of difference compared to other small liberal-arts colleges. **Doug Badger**, director of admission, says, "The tutorial and the individually advised curriculum resonate with many prospective students."

He Holds the Record

Wayne Moyer has perhaps taught more tutorials than any other member of the Grinnell faculty. Tutorials still are among his favorite teaching assignments.



Moyer, Rosenfield Professor of Political Science, has been leading tutorials since his first semester on the Grinnell faculty, in fall 1972. Back then “there was nothing like the orientation we have today for faculty teaching their first tutorial. I felt very unqualified,” he says. “But at least my students had the valuable experience of getting to know one faculty member very well.”

He’s being modest; Moyer’s tutorials have been perennial favorites with two generations of Grinnell students.

“I taught a string of them on American presidents and their secretaries of state,” he says. He focused his tutorials on exploring a couple of questions: “How do you measure the impact of these two actors?” and “More broadly, how do individuals make an impact on history?”

He added a research component: Each student picked a presidential team and examined these questions for that pair in greater depth. Instead of meeting during class hours, the group met over dinner in a private dining room — a format closer to Alan Jones’ vision for the tutorial.

Moyer still teaches the tutorial regularly. He now assigns more and shorter papers earlier in the semester, so that the guidance he gives will be more useful. Otherwise, “the interactions haven’t changed much,” he says. “They’re still enormously rewarding and wonderful for promoting the liberal arts in general. I have enjoyed them as much as any classes I’ve taught at the College.”

We point to the tutorial as an ideal introduction to the intense student-faculty interaction, in-depth research, and well-developed communication skills fundamental to the academic experience here.”

But it wasn’t always that way.

Distribution Deposited

Before tutorials the College had comprehensive distribution requirements. But by the late 1960s, many faculty and students found the requirements stifling. In 1967 the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools’ accreditation team agreed, noting that Grinnell’s curriculum “might be expected to be more innovative and daring than it appears to be.”

In spring 1970, Professor of Physics **Beryl Clotfelter** circulated “A Proposal That All General Education Requirements Be Abolished.” Clotfelter contended that one-size-fits-all requirements depressed motivation in both faculty and students. “Some faculty whose enthusiasm for the courses is less than total must be impressed into teaching them, with the result that the teaching is not the best the teacher is capable of delivering,” he said. He also noted that “student resentment against requirements is often so intense that it constitutes a real impediment to education. ... Genuine education requires a more active participation by the learner than required courses can elicit.” Four years at Grinnell, he concluded, should be considered “not as the capstone of an education,” in which a set of knowledge was imparted, “but rather as a time to begin the process of self-education which should continue throughout life.”

Then there was the advising system. Clotfelter noted: “The elaborate system of requirements seems to both the adviser and the advisee to relieve them of the necessity of talking about anything important.” **Waldo Walker**, associate dean at the time, says, “We wanted to build an advising system with muscle in it.” Professor Emeritus of History **Don Smith**, then on the history faculty, agrees: “Fewer requirements meant more advising.”

Meanwhile, students were pressing for more academic self-determination. Calling the current system “a hodge-podge of various experiments and philosophies,” where advising amounted to “little more than a brief meeting between student and faculty member that results in a signature and little else,” four students — **Jim Friend ’73**, **Robert Meyer ’72**, **John Otto ’71**, and **Barry Zigas ’73** — produced “Proposals for a Freshman Year Program at Grinnell College.” It envisioned stronger advising, fewer requirements, and a series of regularly scheduled programs of informed discussion between freshmen and faculty members to be held in various residence lounges.

Zigas later wrote that his generation’s desire was to empower first-year students and “place them directly into an exciting study environment over which they had control.” He also hoped that students “might ... more actively engage themselves” in tutorials, rather than taking them for granted as “a requirement that the College has dreamed up for unclear reasons.”

On Nov. 16, 1970, after Clotfelter’s proposal had been modified to include the tutorial, the faculty approved



Photo by Jim Heemstra

Lee Running lifts a sheet of paper-in-the-making. Her tutorial “analyzes how knowledge is constructed in the practical environments of the studio and the chemistry laboratory” while also teaching the arts of close reading, persuasive writing, and participation in small-class discussion.

eliminating all course requirements except the tutorial and those in the major. In the 40 years since, Grinnell has offered 900-plus tutorial topics. Implementation of the tutorial was in the hands of the director of the Office of Academic Advising, **Ray Obermiller**, who with great care and attention continued to refine it for 20 years.

The Tutorial Evolves

The most complete early vision of the tutorial was articulated by Professor of History **Alan Jones '50**. He was influenced by a sabbatical at Oxford University, and his model was a bit different from what later became standard. “A tutor would meet with his group [of 12] together in the first week of the semester to outline the ... topic ... and the expectations of the program. The group would then break down into four groups of three students each” for small sessions. “At each session students would present short essays on aspects of the topic. These essays would be

the basis for group discussion and criticism.” He went on, “A tutorial program is one way of denoting the difference between high school and college work.”

Sarah Purcell '92 was one of Jones’s tutorial students — an experience that seeded her career. Titled *Culture and Power*, it was one of three tutorials based on that fall’s visiting speakers in the Rosenfield Program in Public Affairs, International Relations, and Human Rights. “It was amazing for me as a student in my first semester of college to find myself having dinner at Grinnell House with Ariel Dorfman and Edward Said.” Purcell majored in history, with Jones as her adviser, and eventually followed him into Grinnell’s history department. When she teaches tutorials, she draws on her own experience of seeing a faculty member model the intellectual life. “I haven’t strayed too far,” she says.

A few characteristics of the original tutorials are puzzling today. At first the tutorial was considered so informal it was not actually scheduled, and upper-class

Academic Therapy: Eliza Willis on the Art of Advising

Eliza Willis, professor of political science, asks her tutorial advisees two central questions: "What does it mean for your life as a whole to be an educated person?" and "What education do you need to be a responsible citizen?"

These questions are much broader and at the same time more personal than such questions as "What is your major?" and "Have you met the requirements?"

Then again, so is a Grinnell education.

"I enjoy getting to know students through the advising process," says Willis. "I spend a lot of time on it."

That close, individual relationship with students is something that Grinnell requires of faculty, tutorial and otherwise. And, Willis says, it shows Grinnell's commitment to an education structured around the needs of each student, rather than a generic set of requirements. In academic advising sessions, she often reflects on her own "fairly rigidly prescribed" undergraduate education. "Even with all those requirements," she tells advisees, "I wish I had taken more science."

She's constantly pointing out the value of a broad academic perspective — both to highly goal-oriented students and to those who are less focused.

"If you plan to be a doctor, you may have Spanish-speaking patients in the future," she'll say to a premed student. "Now is your chance to take Spanish."

She also encourages students who have yet to discover a passion to sample broadly from Grinnell's academic banquet until they find something they really like. "You don't want to create an interest," she says, "just to let them find it."

In fact, "advising" may be a bit of a misnomer, as what Willis and her fellow tutorial instructors do is a delicate balance of instructing, reflecting, collaborative brainstorming, and doing what at least one Grinnellian has referred to as "academic therapy" — helping a student understand who she or he is and how that evolving identity can best be served by everything Grinnell's curriculum has to offer.

"It's tricky, and it's a big responsibility," Willis says. "I love teaching tutorials."



students served as teaching "colleagues." Until 1984 tutorials were ungraded, but required a detailed written evaluation of the student by the tutor.

A Life-Changing Experience

Professor Emeritus of Chemistry **Luther Erickson** recently polled former advisees about the importance of the tutorial in their academic careers. His tutorial, *Water*, one of the original 1971 offerings, focused on water quality issues and became a student favorite. One of his tutees, **Matthew Elrod '89**, reported serving on the first-year seminar committee at Oberlin College, where he now teaches, and continued to find the tutorial a valuable model. **Deborah Swackhamer '76**, now teaching at the University of Minnesota, publicly credited Erickson's tutorial for launching her academic career.

Henry Rietz, like Purcell, has been on both sides of the tutorial table. "I came here thinking I would be a physics major," he says. He took Professor of Physics **Bob**

Cadmus, Jr.'s tutorial, *A Puzzle of the Universe*. His first paper was on the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a Babylonian poem that lays out an ancient cosmology. He also took ancient Greek, and studying ancient texts in both classes ignited new passions. He double-majored in classics and religious studies, and focused his research on the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Rietz says teaching the tutorial is a chance for faculty as well as students to experiment. His first tutorial, entitled Apocalyptic "Sectuality," has since become one of his regular course offerings. "The tutorial is an opening," he says, and Purcell concurs: "It's an ideal place to explore new topics for scholarship."

Joyce Stern '91, dean for student academic support and advising, sums up: "We developed a program that other colleges have emulated ... the pairing of academic skill development with close advising." Forty years later, the pairing still lies at the heart of the Grinnell experience.

—*Richard Cleaver '75 is a grant writer for Grinnell College and a frequent contributor to Grinnell Magazine.*